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ABSTRACT

To provide students with a rhetorical stance and motivation, a college freshman composition class adopted the ideas of the "radical" literacy educator, Paulo Freire, who believes that literacy should allow students and teachers to become truly conscious of the world. Class projects were initiated in which the students had as much expertise as the instructors. The first project addressed people's consciousness of themselves as workers (students were invited to share impressions of their worst job), while the second focused on television criticism, comparing "Hill Street Blues" and "Miami Vice." The third project featured a look at public issues through editorials in the local newspaper, and in the fourth project, the students presented "tours" of parts of their city. All the projects involved various levels and kinds of peer feedback, and the students, most of whom were taking only this one class, quickly developed a feeling of shared community. The essays that came out of the first project, although many contained technical errors, had a natural order to them that interested the readers and the writer. The television project discussions led to shifts of consciousness that enabled the students to grasp the notion of concession in argument, a concept that also helped in the third project, concerning arguments and editorials. In the final project the students examined their city closely, gaining a sense of civic pride and appreciation. (NKA)

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Speaking, Writing, and Performance

An Integrated Approach to the Word

It is a given that the writing setting for a composition class is a bizarre and unnatural one. Rarely are we suddenly required to speak or write for fifty minutes on some specific topic about which we might well have no ideas or interest. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that students churn out dull essays. As Wayne Booth states in his essay, "The Rhetorical Stance," a student cannot "write a decent sentence, paragraph, or paper until his rhetorical problem [is] solved--until, that is, he [has] found a definition of his audience, his argument, and his own proper tone of voice" (25-26). Last spring, we strove to provide our class with a rhetorical stance. We wanted them to have a motivation, aside from the course requirement, for writing each essay, and an audience, a living audience whose opinion they cared about, to write for. Thus we sought to provide motivation and to create a community within a composition course. The arena in which we did this work was a combined course in speaking and writing.

The basic design for the course consisted of four speech-essay projects. There is a diagram of the typical project on the handouts we have provided. We would begin with a shared class experience. The sharing of an experience would provide a sense of community, and the experience itself would give the students motivation to speak and write. We got the idea of the shared experience from our reading of Paolo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Freire is a teacher who was exiled from his native Brazil when the generals took over in 1964. He had been organizing literacy teams that

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went into backwater areas not as missionaries (bringing the Pure Word to the savages) but as brothers in a community.

Instead of trying to deposit knowledge in students, his workers created experiences from which problems in the community were identified and discussed. These problems then became the motivation for their writing. As Freire defines it, "Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of men as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation" (71).

Freire is one of the few literacy educators who ever asked what people once literate could use their literacy for. It should be used, he thought, to allow students and teachers to become truly conscious of the world, and of their own consciousness. As teachers, all of us tend, consciously or not, to think in terms of messages that we are bringing to our students, but in this project the two of us wanted to consciously fight this tendency. We hoped to join our students in making fresh discoveries about the world around us.

For this reason, our projects involved matters where the students had as much expertise as we, or more. The first of them addressed working people's consciousness of themselves as workers; the second focused on making conscious the oral criticism of television; the third was a look at public issues through newspaper editorials; and in the fourth the students presented "tours" of parts of the city where they lived.

The class experiences were actually one of the last things we thought of as we were working out the design for this experiment, but they proved to be one of the most valuable elements. They allowed us as teachers to offer out instruction in rhetoric in the context of needs which the students had already perceived, needs which provided the motivation both for presenting

the speech and essay and for learning the rhetorical skills that could make their speech and essay successful.

We began each two-week project with a shared experience which would help us all become more conscious both of the world around us and of consciousness itself. Some of these experiences were "consciousness-raising" indeed. We would like to tell you about the shared experiences that preceded each project and the impact that that experience had on the students' oral and written work for that project.

Our first project was about working, and our first shared experience was to have each student tell a story about her worst job. Augusta College is a commuter campus, most students work in menial jobs around town, and many are older students who have spent years in dead-end jobs. So when we started the "Working" project with a session in which each person spoke at length on the worst job she had held, we heard some hairy things. One woman told of the years she had spent in a shirt factory sewing the hems on pockets. Not the pockets on the shirts, but the hems on the pockets--five thousand hems per day, five days a week, for two years. What we got from the class experience was a <u>feel</u> for our culture's attitude towards working in general and towards menial work in particular. We were not teachers depositing sociological information; we were rather members of a community engaged in the act of discovering realities about our shared culture. In this experience, all of us were authorities. In order to make the students conscious of their own authority as workers, we then assigned Studs Terkel's book, <u>Working</u>, which itself gives a voice and a personality to every type of job.

Each student now chose and performed one interview out of the Terkel book. Interestingly, few students performed the interviews of people who

held the same types of jobs they did. They seemed drawn to the more glamorous jobs in the book, and so we heard from the yacht-broker and the doctor in the text, while in our introductory experiences we heard from bus boys and drywall workers. What gave the personal testimonies even greater power than the performances from the Terkel text was that the places described were the places we all saw and visited every day. So, a student who described his rather harrowing experiences as a bus boy at the Shoney's near the campus changed forever the consciousness of the class concerning that restaurant--and made us, many of us for the first time, register the bus boys and the way they were treated the next time we visited the restaurant. No longer was the hem on their shirt pocket a matter of expected convenience; it was something done by someone like Becky in our class, at a great cost of mental fatigue.

Once the students became aware of the value to the community of their individual experiences, they were motivated to shape essays and speeches based on their knowledge of one job. Like all of our projects, this first one involved various levels and kinds of peer feedback, as you can see from your handout. The essays that came out of this project, although they were riddled with technical errors, had a natural order to them and were interesting to readers (the class as a whole) and to the writer, the creator of the work. A common problem that plagues the first few essays of most freshman composition students is that of invention, and there is a tendency to substitute generalities for specifics. Given a topic, students do not trust their own experiences as viable sources of invention. But with this project our students did not have this trouble, despite the fact that this was their first college composition.

The second project, that on TV criticism, yielded similarly interesting essays and speeches. It began with an enlightening shared experience. It

was so enlightening, in fact, that we got a media-criticism out of it. On the first Monday of the project, we watched a taped episode of Miami Vice for an hour and then discussed it for another hour. Then on the Tuesday we did the same for an episode of Hill Street Blues. It was remarkable how those two days not only gave the class a chance to express their own critical criteria, but also afforded them an opportunity to put those criteria under the microscope of discourse for the first time, and in many cases actually to revise those criteria during the two days.

In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire had written about work in which the literacy team would join up with some local people to prepare a show of photo slides of the community. The slide show and the people's responses to it were then to be the foundation of all subsequent activity. The idea was to provide literacy in the context of the people's demand for literacy once they had seen that they needed it in order to "name the world." In our own little project, we found that we too were participating in some fundamental changes by arranging these shared experiences. Especially during the Hill Street screening, we noticed that some real changes were occurring in their way of seeing the world. Most of our seventeen students came into the class believing that everyone perforce saw the world as they did. Their traditionalist and unitary way of seeing things began to be transformed through dialogue. Once she is challenged by dialogue, a student who holds the notion of a single unitary view of life can take one of two courses. She can give full assent to the presence of ambiguity in the world, as happened with some students in our discussion. Or she can retreat from language altogether, as in the case of those who persisted in saying no more than that they "just" preferred the other program. But those students who were willing to enter into a dialogue enjoyed the chance to test out their old

viewpoints, the chance to "think"--a word that many of them used in the discussion. This word was also used by a student, a graduate of a local church school called One Way Baptist who became conscious of her own unitary views for the first time in this dialogue. She said this:

> "When I watch most TV I don't think about morals. They have no morals I just kind of watch it and take it in. But when I watch Hill Street Blues I'm fighting with it--not fighting it, but thinking about my morals--when they bring out what they think is really right. So I think it's good when you can get into a show, identify with it, and think about it.

This kind of change in outlook can occur only in the matrix of dialogue, which in turn requires the existence of a community. In the non-community of a composition class in which student essays are read only by the teacher and students speak to each other only to share their uneasiness about their writing, a student would never enter into dialogue fully enough to experience such a shift in consciousness. But, during this project, a student could disagree with a classmate and be asked to give reasons for his position. For many students, this emphasis on reason to back up opinion was a novel experience. These discussions led to shifts in consciousness which enabled them to grasp the notion of concession in argument, an idea which confuses many freshmen. Their acceptance of this idea helped them with out third project, concerning argument and editorials.

The shared experience for this third project had been taking place every Friday throughout the quarter. Throughout the course we were intent upon replicating natural occasions of discourse. So we set up Fridays as a day in which each student was responsible for bringing a copy of the very conservative local newspaper, the Augusta Chronicle to class. The class

then divided into groups of three or four and each student sat and read the paper until she came across an article which interested her. As part of our emphasis on community, we were trying to recreate the feel of mornings at home when one finds items of interest in the paper and shares them with one's companions. The groups were then to select one of the articles that was found to be interesting and center a question on the article. That was then the weekend essay topic for that group of students. On the Monday which began the third project, the groups reconvened and selected the best essay of the group. The author then rehearsed with her group and then presented this essay to the class. One of our most interesting groups of essays originated from a tiny filler article about an arrested confidence man. The group which discovered this topic then proceeded to write essays about confidence men they had heard of in Augusta and produced four interesting essays. The groups were entering into dialogue with the paper that they read, instead of passively accepting it as information handed down from on high. This group dialogue with the local paper enabled the students to prepare argumentative speeches and essays in response to newspaper editorials. We were constantly trying to make these students awake to the world around them, to the world that created their perspectives.

In order to introduce our class to our fourth and final project, the tours of places in Augusta, our next shared class experience was a show of slides we had taken of the city. We had recruited two native Augustans from our faculty, one black and one white, to show us areas of the city which they deemed somehow characteristic or important. We learned quite a bit about Augusta from our three days of touring. We had shots of the first black church, the first black school, the campus of the private black college in town, an old hamburger joint, rich neighborhoods, poor ones, an old

cemetery, a library, and some pictures of our decaying downtown area. We had modeled our project after the slide shows which Freire showed in Brazilian villages. Freire gives an example of how students can teach teachers when he discusses the results of one slide which showed a drunk weaving down the main street of town while two workmen watch from the side. The audience immediately cried out that, of the three men depicted in the picture, only the drunk was a hard-working man, for work was so unbearable that it could be forgotten only in drunkenness. We awaited similar illuminations about August culture from our class. And, though we met with some boredom when we showed our slides to our class, we were taught something about the social spheres in Augusta from the ways in which different areas were identified. One student identified the cemetery as "where we used to play." Only one or two white students, but all four blacks, identified the specific spots in the old burnt-out downtown district. Many students knew, immediately, the interior of the gunshop we had stumbled upon. Only one student, a black woman, could readily identify the campus of the black college which is in the heart of Augusta, quite near to Augusta College. Initially, our students were uninterested in our slides. But as the project unfolded, and as they began to work on their own tours, they became excited and proud of their city and of their own expertise.

In our pre-class planning, we had had our highest hopes for these tours, which were the final project. For in these tours the class would surely be working with areas in which they were experts, and we novices. The areas which the groups selected showed promise. We were to be told about the Augusta dam, about various Augusta bars, about a lake in the middle of the city, and about one of the famous golf courses which dot the city. We had originally hoped to have these tours be on the actual sites, but we realized that time constraints would not permit this. Some of the

tours were quite successful. One group took us to various parts of the lake, using slides, skits, and sports equipment and told the class new information about a spot that most of them had considered themselves to be very familiar with. The group which toured the bars came up with a good centering device; they presented it as a special newscast view of Augusta bars. Each member of the group dressed up in such a way as to symbolize the mood, class, and economic level of the bar and was then interviewed by the newscaster. Although many of the characteristics of each bar were known by the class, the students had never consciously worked out the factors that made up the mood of each bar. The report brought into the open many of the economic and class distinctions which divide this city.

Although this final project produced interesting oral presentations, we found that the success of each project, in terms of the quality of the work, seemed to decline rather than increase as the quarter progressed. Some of this was due to the very strength of the community feeling that was created. The college is on the quarter system, which means a course normally runs Monday through Friday an hour a day. Studying with Drs. Stracke and Snow was the primary activity in the lives of each of our students, since some of them were taking no other courses, and none was taking more than one other course. Students became fast friends and we had a difficult time stopping the socializing that ensued. We had been so successful at subduing some of the terror that often accompanies a beginning Freshman Composition class that we had trouble regaining the students' seriousness, although we did not lose their motivation for each act of communication or their sense of community. The students all expressed appreciation for the combined course. Many of them opted to enroll in our version of the freshman literature course, which includes a number of performances. A community was created in

the ten weeks of the course. Within that community a consciousness of the world around them was developed, and a heightened understanding of both written and spoken forms of communication took place.